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Dabney, Charles William

A spiritual victory

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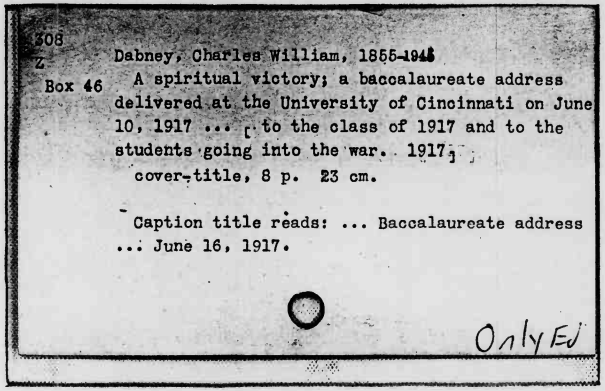

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Box 46

Dabney, Charles William, 1855-1945
A spiritual victory; a baccalaureate address delivered at the University of Cincinnati on June 10, 1917 ... [to the class of 1917 and to the students going into the war. 1917]
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# A SPIRITUAL VICTORY

Box 46

A BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI ON JUNE 10, 1917, BY PRESIDENT CHARLES WILLIAM DABNEY

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# A SPIRITUAL VICTORY

THE BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS TO THE CLASS OF 1917
AND TO THE STUDENTS GOING INTO THE WAR
BY PRESIDENT CHARLES W. DABNEY
UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI
JUNE 16, 1917

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**"Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not; behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; He will come and save you."—Isaiah XXXV, 4.**

Human history is merely one long record of the struggle between the physical forces and the spiritual forces in the world. The lesson today,* for example, refers to the contest between Edom and Israel, the children of the flesh and the children of the spirit of that day. The first portion of the lesson declares God's judgment upon the brutal despotism that had persecuted His people, and the second part describes the victory of theocracy and the establishment of peace. Of the cruel Edomites it is written: "His fury was upon all their armies, He hath utterly destroyed them. He hath delivered them to slaughter." The children of Israel he makes the founders of His spiritual State, which is to give the world liberty and peace.

> "And an high way shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The. Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, yea fools, shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast go up thereon, they shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there; and the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy be upon their heads: they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

The great struggle in which we are engaged today is only another phase of this same age-old contest between the spirit and the flesh, between right and might, which has been going on since the world began. The "will to power" caused Cain to kill his brother, just as it is leading men today to kill their brethren. But this brutal lust for power will not conquer in the end. The desire of the human soul for liberty and righteousness cannot be killed. Little by little man is winning the freedom and justice which is the only basis of permanent peace. It has been a desperate struggle since the beginning, but the champions of the Spirit are winning today as they have always done. For God has given them the pledge of His support. To the soldiers of liberty His command comes again:

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*The lesson from the Old Testament was Isaiah XXXIV and XXXV; and from the New Testament, John I, 3.

"Be strong, fear not; behold your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you!"

To all such valiant souls His promise is:

"They shall see the Glory of the Lord, the excellency of our God."

I congratulate you, young men and women of the classes of 1917 and all other young people, upon living in such times. For nineteen hundred years there has been no such great moment as this. This war is just another tremendous struggle between the spiritual and the physical forces in the world. And the entry of America into this struggle is its supreme event. Whether as volunteers or selected men for the army and navy, physicians and nurses in the Red Cross, makers of munitions or producers of food, I congratulate you heartily on being young and able to take a hand in this tremendous struggle.

First, think of the vastness, the stupendous force, and the significance of this war. At other periods single countries, one after another, have fallen into the crucible, but now the whole world is in the vast, fiery furnace. The times are mad and every shore of humanity is being swept by the fury of this conflagration. It is Armageddon, indeed.

The world is ripe for a great victory for liberty and righteousness. When human institutions are in the melting pot, men's long-repressed aspirations have opportunities for free expression in the formulation of new systems such as never existed before. A great process of preparation has been going on for years. Never was there so much knowledge, so widely spread, and with such means of still wider dissemination. And never before did the world have so many new and great means for remoulding itself upon lines of humanity.

For a century we had been living on such a level of comparative monotony that short-sighted people thought the soil of the earth was exhausted and the seed of life dead. The development of freedom had ceased, they said, and the progress of righteousness had come to a halt. Such is human nature that peace does not produce great moral triumphs. Causing idleness, soft living, and corruption, peace is sometimes more deadly to spiritual interests than war. Poverty and toil make men strong; suffering and sorrow make them true; trials and temptations make them wise.

But this war has already made a prodigious change in the world. History is now being made at a tremendous rate, not merely in the shifting of battle lines, but by the springing to life of seeds of hope planted ages ago. Fertilized with the rich blood of the world's best men, the fields of earth are preparing a new springtime.

When I congratulate you, I do not fail to recognize the horrors and the sorrows of this most terrible war of history. War has indeed become in this day the most frightful evil of the world. We shudder at the abominable cruelties and barbarities perpetrated, and we feel unspeakable detestation for their authors, but we recognize at the same time that this contest will decide the great issue of the ages. When the



fires have burnt out, we know that autocracy and imperialism will be dethroned, and that democracy and brotherhood will reign and bring in a new era of peace and progress.

Neither do we forget the sorrows of the people in the stricken countries. Already vast multitudes of old men and women in many lands walk sorrowfully in funeral processions, mourning their dead. We cannot forget them. It may be their eyes are holden, not knowing that One walks with them Who is reproving them for slowness of heart to believe all that the prophets of old have told of the divine method in the creation and education of man. But the great lesson is being learned. The revelation of the prophets is meeting today its parallel revelation in the vision of a world learning through suffering the duty of brotherhood and the beauty of righteousness. Therefore, even in these hours of awe, we should lift up our hearts with the thought that "many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which we see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which we hear, and have not heard them."

Doubtless it is too early to reap the harvest sown in blood and tears. But it is not too early to recognize that a vast new crop of ideals is growing which it is our duty to cultivate. Even if we cannot gather them ourselves, we can at least enjoy the faith that others

"The issue of our toil shall see;
Young children gather as their own
The harvest that the dead had sown."

In spite then of the horror and the sorrow of it, I congratulate you because for Americans it is a spiritual war—a war of ideas, a war for liberty and equality, a war for the establishment of law and the rights of the weak, a war for democracy as the basis of world peace. Never was there, in fact, a war for greater spiritual ends. It is only for these causes that America is in the war. Nothing less could have brought her into it. Not for material reward, not for indemnity, not for conquest, not for territory, not for anything save the high duty of succoring democracy, so desperately and outrageously assailed, did we go into this war. We went into the war only for the ideals of the republic, to defend before the world the faith of the fathers who gave to us this government.

For what is this our country? What does it stand for? A great stretch of territory with wonderful resources? A vast aggregation of arts and industries? A hundred million of happy and prosperous people? Yes, our country is all of these. But the United States of America is vastly more than this. This republic is a scheme of life, a system of society, a plan of freedom, a pledge of peace, and an ideal of opportunity—the organized expression of the belief that every human being shall have the freest opportunity for his own development in accordance with the powers his God has given him, and that nothing shall be put in the way of that free development either in men or nations. This is what the republic stands for. This is America—*Opportunity* for all men, all races, all nations! It was for this that the fathers died, upon this foundation they established this government. This we have not forgotten and this we shall never forget. It is to

make sure that this ideal shall not perish from the earth that America has gone into this war. As our President said, "God helping her, she can do no other."

This is for America a spiritual war, because it has brought her an unprecedented opportunity for service and sacrifice. For three years we have been standing by, watching this awful contest for the liberty and peace of the world, and doing nothing to help beyond selling munitions. Doing only this we were in danger of selling our souls. Had we seen it through to the end in this way and not taken our share of the burden, we should have been damned eternally. We should be glad that the course of events has made it now our privilege to join in this struggle for freedom and democracy.

"Let Freedom's land rejoice!
Our ancient bonds are riven,
Once more to us the eternal choice
Of good or ill is given.
Then praise the Lord Most High,
Whose strength hath saved us whole,
Who bade us choose that the flesh should die
And not the living soul."

We should be glad of the opportunity for sacrifice in such a cause. Great spiritual revivals come not by seeking. They are the product of unselfish efforts. True nobility is only born of service and sacrifice. America needed for her own soul's salvation to join the nations fighting for these most precious things of life. Every consideration of honor and principle required that she unite with them. As enduring friendships do not come of mere avowals of regards, but of a common struggle in some high and dangerous contest, so winning a righteous war together will, by revealing brave hearts to brave hearts, unite all true men in common aims. Such a mutual struggle will do more to unite the nations of freedom and peace than all the international treaties ever made.

Two things our American fathers hoped to give the nations of the earth—liberty and peace. They believed that these two things could only be established through democracy. Americans hoped always that all the nations would in time become democracies. We have watched for a century and a half, therefore, with intensest interest, the extension of liberalism and freedom throughout the governments of the world. We have indeed sympathized with all men everywhere who have dared to fight for liberty and the right of self-government; but it has been chiefly by words, not deeds, that we have expressed our sympathy. This war gives us the first real opportunity to help the other people of the world in their struggle for democracy. It gives us, also, the greatest opportunity we have ever had to promote the second object of our fathers—the establishment of world-wide peace. For only in a world of democracy can we hope to have permanent peace.

Let us face it! We are called to sacrifice as well as to service. The war will cost us much in suffering and sorrow, in precious blood and lives. But we remember that all the spiritual good that has come down to us was paid for by the bloody sweat and tears and suffering



of myriads of nameless martyrs. Like a great gulf-stream "of moving waters at their priest-like task of pure ablutions round earth's human shores," the tide of sacrifice flows through the world to redeem and cleanse and sanctify it unceasingly. It flows now upon our shores.

This redemptive work is not a single act in time and place. Standing as it does for the great sacrifice, the Cross is indeed the Rock of Ages, the foundation of all that makes life worth living, the foundation of life itself. But the whole of humanity was not saved by that one sacrifice. Self-sacrifice is a never-ending and divine process, in which the inmost heart of the universe is constantly breaking out in fresh flower. The Cross is indeed, its ever-living symbol, but it is not fixed forever on Calvary. Borne by heroic hands at the head of the endless consecrated procession of mankind, the Cross is still marching down the ages, calling men to suffer and to die for their fellows. And it came to us on Good Friday, the sixth day of April, 1917.

Shall we shrink from taking it up? We dare not. Where would the world have been if men, our elder brothers, had been afraid to die? Where would we be today, if our fathers had been afraid to die?

The constant necessity of sacrifice, the eternal reappearance of the Cross, its ceaseless re-enactment in history, is the surest proof of man's inalienable birthright of inward freedom and, as we see now more plainly than ever before, it is the only guarantee of his outward liberty. Then shall not we make our contribution of sacrifice, our gift of blood and tears and life for the good of men?

The call to sacrifice came to Belgium and she gave her sons by the thousands for the protection of her honor. It came to France and she has given the lives of a million sons already, that liberty, equality, and fraternity may live in the world. The call came to Britain and her sons on all the continents rallied to defend the freedom of the world. And now the call has come to us to take up the Cross for Freedom.

"O dearest country of my heart,
Make clean thy soul for sacrifice on Freedom's altar fire;
For thou must suffer, thou must fight until the war-lords cease
And all the peoples lift their heads in liberty and in peace."

Think of the searching changes this war will make in human society. This world of men will never be the same again. As a result of this terrific cataclysm all the wrong things, the things without foundation and the improperly adjusted things—all the things that can be shaken will be thrown down. Laws that are not equitable will be altered; constitutions not founded on justice will be changed; monarchies having no foundation in right will be overthrown.

This terrible emergency has already driven all the people of the nations together as never before. As a result, the world is learning to live a family life, in which the only thing that counts is service. What a magnificent example of united service and sacrifice these European nations are setting for us! For the time being the people belong to their nations with everything they possess. The words "Get, and gain, and grab" have been replaced by "Give, and serve, and love."

Moreover, social distinctions are lost sight of in the supreme distinction of a common duty. Whether in uniform or out of it, whether rich or poor, educated or ignorant, men are esteemed more and more for what they are and can do, and not for names or positions. Property is regarded not so much as that which a man can keep to himself as that, whether in wealth, in capacity, or in skill "being proper to the man," he can give to his country's needs. It is not a "Liberty Loan" they are making, it is a "Liberty Gift" of all they are and have. This is the spirit of the European peoples and this is the spirit we must have in America, if we do our duty by them and by our country.

Now, men are already asking, Why may this way of looking at the nation as one big family, realized under the stress of war, not continue when the danger is past and peace has come? Is not this, after all, the great moral lesson of the war? Why may not men give themselves and all they have to the service of their country? Why may not the comradeship of the trenches, where rich and poor, lord and peasant, are fighting on an absolute equality, continue after the war as a comradeship in office, farm, and factory? Was the war not sent to teach us how to live together as brethren in one great economic, social, and spiritual state? Shall we not learn the lesson and apply it in peace?

But the important thing is that all the thoughts of men will be changed. Men will hereafter take a more spiritual view of life and all that belongs to it. Twenty millions of men who have faced the realities of life and death, of time and eternity, in the trench or in the charge, will return to civil life in the allied lands. These men will have found new ideals and new values in life. They went in lightheartedly and bravely, only perceiving dimly the issues. But they will come home changed men. On the day that peace spreads her white wings over our world again, these men will come home tested, purified, exalted, with new ideals of life and duty. If they have learned nothing else, they will have learned that freedom is better than riches, service better than ease, sacrifice better than selfishness..

War purifies men. Men hitherto entirely enslaved in self-indulgence and sensual living will find themselves sobered, liberated, and redeemed. The spiritual impulses which they thought cast off with the clothes of childhood will reassert themselves, and the old ideals of loyalty, devotion, and sacrifice will become compelling again. The fire will try "every man's work of what sort it is," and though "his work shall be burned, he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire."

The sense of man's dependence on his God and of his duty to his brother in the trenches, the recognition of the fatherhood of God and of the brotherhood of man, will become real and vital in millions of lives. Much will be lost in this war, but God the Father and man the brother will be found by multitudes.

Men who are ready to die for humanity will insist on having a chance to live for humanity. Such men as these will certainly demand not merely a free world, but a just world. They will insist that the children of the future shall in their day have a better chance to live and be happy, and will demand that government, industry, education—the whole social organism—shall be re-formed.



The war is thus unquestionably making men more religious in spirit and life. But what effect will it have on the organization of religion, that is, on the churches?

Such a baptism of fire will purify the churches as well as the people. But it will do more than purify, it will simplify and unite them.

Undoubtedly many phases of religion, hitherto deemed important, will lose their interest for the men who face these realities. The multiplication of sects, the assumptions of sacerdotalism, the elaboration of creeds, the ritualism and aestheticism of worship, which so occupy the minds of some ecclesiastics, seem unreal and foolish to men kneeling in the trenches, thinking on death and eternity. But, if the testimony of the thinkers at the front be true, the realities of religion, the recognition of the fatherhood of God, of communion with Him, of the brotherhood of man and the duty to him and the faith that leads to self-effacement and sacrifice never had such a strong hold on men.

This war is teaching the people, those at home as well as those in the trenches, that, as Wells says, "only the complete simplification of religion to its fundamental idea, the world-wide realization of God as the king of the heart and of all mankind, will bring men security and happiness. The Kingdom of God over a world-wide system of republican states is the only possible formula under which we may hope to unify and save mankind." This is the sane, simple, and convincing type of religion for which the world waits. This, we believe, is the only solution of the problem of the ages—the complete liberation and development of men. This is the hope that breaks upon our vision as we grope our way through this night of horrors—a setting free of all mankind, "a simplification of religion," "a kingdom of God over a world-wide system of republican states"—this is what our armies and navies are fighting for, and this is what you, young men and women, must verify and realize in your day.

Such will be, *must* be, the spiritual victory. No material victory will bring the world a peace worth having. It is not the new map to be made of Europe, it is not indemnities or alliances, that are going to matter. The Vienna Congress made a new map of Europe and this terrible war is the result. The victory over Napoleon was a material victory, but a spiritual defeat for Europe. If this war is not to be a mere overture to another and more dreadful war, a material victory must not satisfy us. It will not be enough to defeat imperialism and militarism, we must destroy throughout the world the spirit of which imperialism and militarism are the embodiment. For these ideas have no geographical limit. They are indifferent to all political organizations. They are common through all belligerents. There is danger that even we may become subject to the same wicked ambitions. Ours must, therefore, be a spiritual victory, a victory of ideas, a victory of peace and goodwill: a victory of love, not of hate; a victory of gifts, not of spoils; a victory that shall not rob any nation of a single right, but shall give all men the blessings of freedom and brotherhood.

It is to affirm a human bond stronger than any racial tie, stronger than any national union, or any confession of faith, that we have gone to war. It is not for the Fatherland of any one people, but for the Patrie des Ames—the Fatherland of All-Souls, that we are fighting. It

is to establish the brotherhood of all men, that communion of souls which is the essence of all religion, that we are contending. It is the idea of the larger communion, enlarged to embrace all men in all lands, which is already emerging from the welter and sacrifice of these days.

This war must, alas, be won on battlefields, but the war against militarism is already won in the domain of the spirit. What else means the entrance of America, the awakening of Russia, the declarations of the neutral nations, if not an outpouring of the desire of mankind for a more perfect realization of the brotherhood of man? What else mean these voices beginning to be heard above the din of war to which men everywhere are listening, if not a new dispensation of peace and good will? Lloyd George in Britain, Woodrow Wilson in America, Viviani in France, Kerensky in Russia, are merely the voices of their people, demanding liberty and fraternity "in the widest commonalty spread." In all countries the builders of the new world order are emerging from the darkness; another and greater army is organizing, the army of the rebuilders of the world! Already the war of ideas is won! The spiritual victory is ours!

These, dear friends, are some of the reasons why, terrible as the times are, we should feel it a privilege to live in them. These days are so fraught with vast possibilities that while we recognize that frightful dangers are lurking within them, nothing is too great to hope as their fruition. It seems, verily, as if God had gathered up all the glorious ideals, dreams, hopes, and visions of men out of all the centuries and was holding them out in overflowing hands to the people of this age as the reward of righteous war.

The future of this world assuredly belongs to the people who act truly and hold out bravely in this awful struggle. Ah! my young friends, in such times no one dares live lightly, for whether our country is consumed in the furnace or comes out of it purified, depends not upon the government in Washington, but upon you, upon every citizen in the nation, upon the consecrated service of every man and woman among us. Each one of us has a definite and serious task to perform in this world tragedy. Acting our parts thus in the fierce spot-light of this day, we should be inspired by the thought that the "choir invisible of those immortal dead," who poured out their blood so freely for these ideals, is watching now from above the clouds to see how we act our part in this drama of life and death. Shall we fail to act our parts as they did theirs?

Shall we not rather, praying the blessing of God and consecrating ourselves for any sacrifice, take our places in the army of these, our own loved ones here and those in Belgium, in France, in Italy or wherever they may be, who shall fight for the honor of the past, the salvation of the present, and the hope of the future?

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